JANE YOLEN

From Andersen On: Fairy Tales Tell Our Lives

Human beings are storytelling animals. It is what distinguishes us from the other beasts. We are dreamers, too, always looking for that bit of luck, that bit of magic, that bit of courage that guarantees us the prize. We are wizards of the mouth.

Our stories reflect the human condition, and none more so than the folk tales that have been an inheritance from our great-great-ever-so-many-great-grandparents back to the beginning of time.

We polish those stories and send them on. Stories about transformations and transportations, about miracles and mayhem, about fairy wives and demon lovers, about the gods walking about as humans and humans walking on the streets of heaven.

Now children, those great eavesdroppers, have overheard these stories for years. They remembered the ones they wanted to remember, forgot the rest.

Somewhere in the nineteenth century, many of the tales began being set down specifically in books for children. Oh, there had been chapbooks before and schoolbooks and religious books and "courtesy" books before. But the great movement of children's publishing did not get its kick start until the mid-1800s.

Still, children had been coveting and keeping some of the great folk romances and legends like King Arthur and Robin Hood and St. George, resurrecting for their own use the sly fabliaux of Aesop and the stories of Reynard the Fox. Children had been hearing bits of the *Arabian Nights* and the *Ocean Stream of Stories* and the jokes and jests out of the mouth and from the page of the medieval storehouse of such tales.

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We could call this—as John Rowe Townsend does in *Written for Children*—the "prehistory" of children's interest in folklore (18).

And then, in 1805, two hundred years ago, a baby was born on a bed that was made from a coffin platform. The bed still had the black borders of cloth at the bottom. Life and death both sleeping together. That baby would grow up to be the great fairy-tale writer, Hans Christian Andersen.

Or at least such was the story he told.

It was as much a fairy tale as any he ever made up.

Andersen reinvented his life perfectly. And whether you like his stories as I do—or find them frequently sentimental and horrific as Maurice Sendak does (though I must note he has illustrated a number of them!)—you have to admit one thing. Andersen made his life into a perfect tale.

Andersen lived for twelve years with his parents in a tiny one-room house in Odense, a city in Denmark. A lanky child with white-gold hair, Hans was very homely, even by his own account.

His parents were terribly poor. His father was a shoemaker and his mother a washerwoman who did other people's laundry. He had an older half-sister who was probably a prostitute. He hardly knew her.

His father's father was quite mad. He would wander into the woods and return singing loudly, beech leaves and garlands of flowers plaited in his hair. His father's mother incessantly told lies.

Hans told lies, too. About his past life. About his present life.

He called them fairy tales. "My life is a beautiful fairy tale," he began his autobiography, "wonderous happy."

Now Andersen used his life—and the world of story and superstition into which he'd been born—to make fairy tales. As Danish critic Hans Brix put it, "Andersen wrote more self-portraits than Rembrandt ever painted."

But Andersen was not alone in this. All fiction writers lie, or at least we cannibalize our lives, reinventing them in tales. Some tales we call realistic, but they are hardly that. They are fiction, a lie that is—at its core—true.

Let's take a look at the three kinds of fairy stories: the actual folk tale from the mouths of storytellers within a culture, the retold story sometimes told within the culture but often from outside of it, and the art or original fairy tale.

The *actual folk tale* is polished by years of telling. It is a cultural artifact that can be transmitted along slave routes, trade routes, war routes, marriage routes. It celebrates a culture from the inside, so that when it changes cultures, it is often redecorated—for example, the African tar baby story becomes in Native American mouths a gum baby. A Chinese Cinderella speaks to a magical fish

and not a fairy godmother, but the small shoe remains a key piece of the story. An Arabic story brought into Europe may lose its Muslim base. A Norwegian troll story told in Minnesota may take on New World sensibilities.

The *retold story* changes, too, but it is a particular teller who shapes it as much as the culture. Once it is set down, it becomes the "true" story, because transmission in other than the mouth seems, somehow, permanent. So Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century invention (or mistranslation) of the glass slipper remains an artifact now in "Cinderella" right up to our own times. Also in the seventeenth century, Madame Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" was not the first telling, but the one that set the standard for all time. So Disney's retelling of "Snow White" gives us seven dwarfs who define cute with their names and their dances. It is difficult to remember how anonymous they are in the earlier versions.

The *art or literary fairy tale* is a personal telling, too, but invented whole cloth (or patchworked together from many disparate sources) into a single story. Often autobiography plays a key role. And this is where Hans Christian Andersen shines, and in which form he wrote so well that August Strindberg called him "a perfect wizard." Andersen wrote this in his tale "The Will-o-Wisps Are in Town, Said the Bog Witch": "Once there was a man well acquainted with fairy tales. In fact they used to come knocking at his door." There's no question that he was talking about himself. Stories came knocking at his door, and by opening the door to them all, he made friends throughout the world.

But if Hans Christian Andersen was the best known of the literary fairy tale writers, he was not the only one. First there were the fable writers. The oldest we know of are the anonymous contributors to the *Panchatantra,* a collection of fables in Sanskrit. Then there is the Greek Aesop, perhaps the most famous, or certainly the most quoted, of fabulists. Other fable writers of note include Jean de La Fontaine, whose rhymed stories are known for their sophistication and wit; the Russian poet Ivan Krylov; the German dramatist and critic Gotthold Lessing, who also wrote a critical essay on the fable; Englishmen John Dryden and John Gay. And of course the German writer E. T. A. Hoffman, deeply a part of the Romantic and Gothic traditions, who numbered among his pieces the stories that inspired several ballets, "The Nutcracker," "Tales of Hoffman," and "Coppelia."

Another Englishman, Laurence Housman—brother of the poet A. E. Housman—wrote fairy tales for children, as did many English and American writers of the day, but his stand out for their lovely embellishments. So did the American Frank Stockton in the early twentieth century. Later on Arnold Lobel wrote a brilliant book called *Fables,* which he also illustrated, that won the Caldecott Medal and was a Newbery Honor Book as well. And of course, James Thurber penned the mordant *Fables for Our Time.*

But the fairy-tale writers began their enormous and lasting popularity in the seventeenth-century French courts. As Terri Windling has written:

> The term *fairy tale* now used as a generic label for magical stories for children, comes from the French term *contes de fées,* coined for a group of seventeenth-century tales written for adults. These stories have come down through the years in simplified forms adapted for children: Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Queen Cat, The White Deer, and Donkeyskin among others. They have their roots deep in the oral folk tradition, but they are not anonymous folk tales themselves . . . they are literary works by a group of Parisian authors, enormously popular in their day, who can, in some respects, be compared with modern writers of fantasy fiction.

First you need to understand that these literary tales began as an art form of the upper classes—Andersen notwithstanding. Though they often borrowed heavily from the peasant traditions, they also plucked characters, settings, names, and story ideas from myth, Romance, and literary sources. They are imbued with wit, and are often glosses on politics, government, and the social and gender issues of the day.

And then—oh, then the miraculous happens. All the political/governmental/social/gender issues fall off, like leaves in the fall. And the bare ligaments of the story, reworked through the author's genius, take on a magic of its own.

Now that is all preamble to my real task today, which is to talk about three fairy-tale writers: Hans Christian Andersen, of course. But also Oscar Wilde—and with a great deal of humility in such company, me.

Andersen said—and it applies to all fairy-tale writers to some degree: "I seize on an idea for grown-ups, and then tell the story to the little ones while always remembering that Father and Mother often listen, and you must also give them something for their minds" (qtd. in Windling, "Hans Christian Andersen"). In fact he also spoke out against the notion that he was a man who'd spent his whole life with children. He had none, and knew few intimately. But what he was objecting to specifically were the designs for a statue surrounding him with a circle of eager young listeners when he wrote: "I said loud and clear that I was dissatisfied . . . that my tales were just as much for older people as for children, who only understood the outer trappings and did not comprehend and take in the whole work until they were mature—their naiveté was only part of my tales, that humor was what really gave them their flavor" (Andersen).

As an aside, I imagine that Andersen would have been horrified at how bowdlerized over the years his stories have become, often to make them even

more appealing to young children in picture books. I have seen, for example, picture book editions of *The Ugly Duckling* in which none of the philosophical underpinnings nor the natural history remains, only the barest of story and the inevitable moral.

Actually, Andersen's stories—if you read them side by side with his life—are little pearls of autobiography.

He was the Ugly Duckling, the cygnet in the wrong nest. He made himself through hard work and utter belief in himself into a kind of swan.

He loved the Swedish nightingale, the singer Jenny Lind, who sang without artifice, unlike the other opera singers of the day. He transformed her into the nightingale whose song sings an emperor back to life.

As a child, Andersen played with puppets and longed to make his way in the world of theater. In his tale "The Puppet Showman," a character says, "You want your puppets brought to life. You want them to turn into real live actors, and to be their manager. Then you would be completely happy." It is difficult not to see Andersen as that puppeteer.

At fourteen, when he went off to Copenhagen on his own to make a life for himself, he was just like the silver shilling in his story of that same name: "There was once a silver shilling freshly minted. My, how he jumped and then jingled and cried, 'Huzzah, I'm off to see the great wide world.' And off he went." In fact Andersen was to remain that silver shilling, hoping to shine all his life. Jack Zipes nailed it in his recent book about Andersen, *The Misunderstood Storyteller,* when he writes: "[He] was a pathetic individual, pathetic in the sense that he excited pity and compassion from other people because he was so desperate to be loved and praised and to take his place among the elite in Europe, if not in Heaven."

The first book Andersen published he paid for himself. It was such a failure, its papers were sold to grocers to use for wrapping cheese. And so he wrote in "The Goblin at the Grocer's": "The student stood lost in reading from the sheet of paper that the cheese had been wrapped in. It was a page ripped from an old, unwanted book that should never have been torn like that, for it was a wonderful book full of poetry." And that was how Andersen got back at the critics who doomed his first publication.

He was as touchy and sensitive to slights as the Princess with the pea under all those mattresses. And he certainly loved those who did not love him back, as did the Little Mermaid. Awkward, homely, he wrote bluntly about himself: "I shall have no success with my appearance, so I make use of whatever is available" (Andersen). He courted two women during his lifetime—the sister of a student friend, who became engaged to someone else, and Jenny Lind, who told him that she could offer him only friendship. But if you read his journals, it is clear that he was more deeply obsessed with men: first with Edvard Collins,

then with a young theology student, and finally in his later years, with a handsome young ballet dancer. One has to wonder if he were alive today, how different things might have been for him. But would we then have had tales like "The Brave Tin Soldier" or "The Elf of the Rose" or even "The Snow Queen"?

Andersen took the good, the bad, and the truly ugly in his life and made it beautiful within his stories. He was certainly a product of his age, of the Romantic movement, and the growth of democratic ideas. Many of his tales were in fact quite revolutionary. They were not at all like the dull, pious stories of the approved children's literature of the day, stories intended to teach Christian moral values. They had humor, drama, and often terribly sad endings. But despite the recognizable Christian trappings of such tales as "The Little Match Girl" and "The Red Shoes," they were fairy tales set in a real place—usually Copenhagen or other Danish towns. (Though a few, like "The Nightingale," are set in a quasi-Asian country that has little to do with China or the East and much to do with the fad of Orientalism.) Andersen's tales are by turns earthy, anarchic, fatalistic. And all done in the common, colloquial language of the day, not the overblown literary diction that was usual for the period. Brian Alderson, in a recent *Horn Book*, calls that prose "jokey and throwaway diction."

And so they have survived their age, indeed lived far beyond any other Danish literature of the day. Why else would we be celebrating his two hundredth anniversary in April 2005 and no one else's? And the reason is that they touch on the human condition and touch the human heart, even today.

Now the second fairy-tale writer I want to talk about is Oscar Wilde, who was born fifty years after Andersen and into much better circumstances. His mother was Lady Jane Wilde, a poet, journalist, nationalist, and a fighter for women's rights who, it was said, once warded off creditors by reciting Aeschylus. His father, Sir William Wilde, was a well-known specialist in diseases of the eye and ear who founded a hospital in Dublin a year before Oscar was born. Sir William was decorated by Queen Victoria, who appointed him her Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary. He was also an antiquarian and folklorist.

The Wildes had two sons—Oscar was the second—and a daughter, who died young. It has been said that Lady Wilde insisted on dressing Oscar in girls' clothing because she longed for a daughter. Whether or not that is true, he was a flamboyant dresser from a young age.

Unlike Andersen, who struggled through school, Wilde studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Oxford. In Oxford he shocked everyone with his irreverence toward religion, but was remembered mostly for his stylish and eccentric clothing. Especially a pair of velvet knee breeches.

When at twenty-four he moved to London, Wilde was almost immediately crowned the spokesman for the Aesthetic movement, which advocated art for

art's sake. Wilde worked as an art reviewer. When he went for a lecture tour in the United States and was asked at Customs what he had to declare upon entering the country, he said, "Nothing but my genius" (Harris). He was by all accounts a lively wit, consummately charming, and handsome, putting him on the opposite scale from Andersen, who by his own admission was ugly, and by the judgment of many (like Charles Dickens) socially inept and egotistical.

However, like Andersen, Wilde's first book—and only book of poems—was published at his own expense. It met with mixed reviews. But unlike Andersen's first book, it was *not* sold for wrapping paper.

In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, and for two years, to support his growing family, he edited *Woman's World Magazine*. In 1888 he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales,* fairy stories written, he said, for his two sons. However, the pieces are much too sophisticated for youngsters of two and three. In fact all of his fairy tales are written in an erudite, aesthetic voice, though surprisingly free of the bon mots for which he is famous.

He of course wrote a number of plays that are still popular today—"Lady Windermere's Fan" and "The Importance of Being Earnest" being the most successful.

Wilde's marriage dissolved when he was in jail, having been put there because of a landmark trial in which he was labeled a homosexual and a sodomist (this then illegal in Britain). After two years of doing hard labor, he came out a broken man, impoverished, dying of cerebral meningitis in 1900 in a cheap Paris hotel at the age of forty-six. (As an aside, I was amused to find his fairy tales being sold by Forbes Book Club online, a conservative book club that caters also to the home-schooling crowd. I wonder if they understand anything about the author's life and politics.)

Interestingly, Wilde's comments on his fairy tales are very similar to Andersen's. He wrote that they "were meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (Tiefenbach).

Though there has been recent fairy-tale research about Oscar Wilde's stories—such as Naomi Wood's article in *Marvels & Tales* as "encoding the vision of an idealistic pederast, a man who loves beautiful youths"—I think the stories are so much more than that. How can one, for example, read "The Selfish Giant" in such terms, unless the giant perversely loves the Christ Child, at which point it becomes a story of child abuse and not homosexual love. Or how can the "Happy Prince," about a statue that gives away all its gold leaf and its bejeweled eyes to aid the poor with the help of its friend sparrow, be so narrowly read? Or "The Birthday of the Infanta," in which an unthinkingly cruel royal child laughs at the love of the dwarf jester.

Rather, I think one can read Wilde's politics through his stories. If one remembers that his mother was a politicized Irish nationalist prosecuted for publishing seditious materials, Oscar's political background becomes foreground. A friend of George Bernard Shaw and of William Butler Yeats, Lady Wilde's influence on her son was enormous. She was a firebrand and a political animal. At her Merrion Square home, she ran a cultural salon on Saturday afternoons. It was quite common for more than one hundred people to gather there, the literary, artistic, and political lights of the day.

When Wilde first appeared before an Irish American group in St. Paul, Minnesota, on St Patrick's Day 1882, he was introduced not as a rising literary star, but as "the son of one of Ireland's noblest daughters . . . who did much to keep the fire of patriotism burning brightly" (Lacey). In fact, in one of his most quoted bon mots (from "The Importance of Being Earnest"), Wilde paid tribute to Lady Wilde, saying, "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."

Finally I want to say a few words about my own literary fairy tales. I have been called the "Hans Christian Andersen of America," though, as I keep reminding people, the "Hans Jewish Andersen of America" might be more accurate. Except then I would be Isaac Bashevis Singer.

My background sits somewhere between Andersen's and Wilde's. My mother was one of six children, all of whom were at the top of their respective classes in college. The four girls because psychiatric social workers, the two sons were a doctor and a lawyer. My father's family was much more modest—and only my father, of the eight children—ever went to college. He stayed for a year. His older two brothers and four sisters were all in sales and merchandising. His youngest brother became an interior decorator and later in life a sculptor. My father was a journalist, and then a public relations man. All the Yolens were great storytellers—that is to say they lied a lot and called it truth.

My father was a wonderful liar.

He was also a fanatical kite flier.

One day, in a fit of publicity, he declared himself "Western Hemisphere Kite Flying Champion" as if there had been some sort of contest. But as he knew how to get stories into the papers—remember, he was a PR man—pretty soon it was reliably reported in the magazines and newspapers of the day that here, in their very midst (meaning New York City), was the Western Hemisphere Kite Flying Champion. The *Ford Times, This Week Magazine,* and the like did major articles on him, which he—of course—fully cooperated in writing. His good friend Red Smith, the dean of sports writers, occasionally wrote columns in the *Herald Tribune* about Daddy's exploits, which were never

less than amusing. And suddenly Will Yolen *was* the champion. Had to be. After all, it said so in print!

Then one day he received a formal invitation from the maharaja of Bharatpur in India to come on an all-expenses-paid-for-two kiting safari. The maharaja—himself a kite fanatic and an expert in PR—was the self-proclaimed Eastern Hemisphere kite flying champion.

My father readily accepted. And did he take along my mother as his traveling companion? No—he took along his good friend Red Smith. My father knew good publicity was going to make or break this story. And Red, of course, filed a number of quite spectacular columns about the whole adventure.

The maharaja's hunting palace was the scene of the kite fight. And we will never know the "truth" of what happened there, because Red's columns were amusing fluff about the maharaja's kite bearer and his martini bearer.

My father declared himself the World's Champion Kite Flier (as I assume did the maharaja) and came home to more great press and a big story in *Life* magazine, with a wonderful photograph showing him being towed into the air by a giant kite. And that was yet another bit of misdirection or fiction, for he was really jumping off the arm of a cherry-picker truck hired by *Life* for the photo shoot, landing in a truck bed full of hay, not flying at all.

And the reason I am telling you this story? If you look in major articles in encyclopedias or in magazines or in books about kiting, you will find my father cited as the World's Kite Flying Champion, telling stories about kiting history. Making up stuff that is now reliably reported as true. He was in both the *Guinness Book of World Records* and *Ripley's Believe It Or Not.* He trained the Yale Kite Flying Team when at age seventy he went to college. For a summer term. So he could declare he was a Yale dropout.

I think Hans Christian Andersen would have recognized a kindred soul in my father. I can see them now, sitting in an inn, feet up on low stools, trading lies and enjoying the wit and wisdom in those lies, because they were both such good storytellers.

I was set to become a journalist and a poet and fell into faerie along the way. There was no plan. It just happened. But as Andersen and Wilde before me, one can read biography in my stories. Whether it is the girl named Bourne whose father considers her an unlovely burden in "The Lady and the Mermaid," which effectively pins my relationship with my father to the wall, or the metaphoric "Girl Who Loved the Wind," which tells how my husband and I first met, or the way "Greyling," written when my daughter was an infant, spoke to my fear that one day my new little baby would leave me (well, she's back home, folks, with her own two daughters!), or the portrayal of my best friend's troubled

marriage in "The Girl Who Cried Flowers." A perceptive critic could chart my life through my tales.

But one can also chart the times I live in as well. Often my stories are feminist, such as "Moon Ribbon," in which a girl learns to stand up for herself, which places me clearly in late twentieth, early twenty-first century. My liberal politics entered into "The Hundredth Dove," written smack in the middle of the Watergate hearings, in which the king's forester learns just how far one may have to go to serve his master.

When looking closely at fairy tales, we must remember that authors are as mired in society and in their own biography as any writer of realistic fiction. We must never believe that these tales come culture free.

And yet . . . and yet . . . the best fairy tales reverberate long past the era of their inventing or their author's specific intent.

Princeton historian Robert Darnton—a magnificent scholar (and here's a bit of trivia . . . my high school boyfriend!) writes in *The Kiss of Lamourette*, "I noticed one of the graffiti scribbled on the walls of the pressroom in the headquarters of the Manhattan police: 'All the news that fits we print.' The writer meant that one can only get articles in the paper if there is enough space for them, but he might have been expressing a deeper truth: newspaper stories must fit cultural perceptions of news."

Cultural perceptions of the news. In other words, even in news, the perception of the story is more important than the actuality of the story.

So what can the reader trust?

The story's truth.

The heart's truth.

When I heard Isaac Bashevis Singer declare at a Smith College reading that "Truth in art that is boring is not true," I took it as one of my life mottoes. Whenever the actuality of a thing clashes with the truth of it, writers go for the truth every single time. And so do the readers.

But remember the most important thing of all: that the back end of the word history, is the word *story*.

Andersen knew this, though he may never have articulated it. His stories—like all great stories—found the ears of those who needed to hear them. As I did when as a teen I was crazy about a boy named Jack Mitchell, who was our school prince and would not ever deign to look at me. Yet I would have walked on knives for him. Andersen told me the truth of that in "The Little Mermaid." *Dive back into your own wave* is the story's truth as I read it. And so I did.

I assume, somewhere, Jack Mitchell has had a fine life. And so have I.

Thank you, Perfect Wizard Andersen, for helping me get there. I hope my own stories will do the same.